

## **The Press at Vatican II: The Contribution of Father Edward Heston, CSC**

When reviewing the work of the press at Vatican II, the name of Xavier Rynne (a pseudonym for the Redemptorist Father Francis X. Murphy) inevitably arises first. Indeed, Rynne's famous "Letters from Vatican City," published in the popular *New Yorker Magazine*, were a hit and widely read. While Father Murphy's name and legendary work will live on, an arguably more significant figure was the Holy Cross priest, Edward Heston, who served as the English-speaking press officer for the Vatican Press Office beginning in the second session of the Council and continuing through sessions three and four. By use of his remarkable memory, total command of Latin, and herculean work ethic, Heston informed the English-speaking world of the day-to-day activities of the Council Fathers. The work of Father Heston, within the context of the evolving access of the press to the Council proceedings, the initial frustration of many reporters, and the eventual creation of the Pontifical Commission of Social Communication is the subject of this presentation.

### **Edward Heston, CSC: Background—Slide 1**

Edward Heston was born in Ravenna, Ohio, on September 9, 1907, one of five children (two brothers and two sisters) of Alonzo Heston, a postal employee, and Eleanor Hickey, a native Californian. After moving to South Bend, Indiana as a child he came under the influence of Holy Cross religious who served at his home parish of St. Joseph and, with the desire to become a priest, entered Holy Cross minor seminary on the campus of the University of Notre Dame in September 1921. He professed perpetual vows in the Congregation of Holy Cross in

Assisi, Italy on September 24, 1929 and was ordained a priest at the Basilica of St. John Lateran on December 22, 1934.<sup>1</sup> **Slide 2**

In 1947, after assignments at Notre Dame and the Congregation's United States theologate, Holy Cross College in Washington, D.C., where he additionally served as Secretary to the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Amleto Cicognani, Heston returned to Rome where, as it turned out, he spent the rest of his life. His initial reason for transfer was to serve as superior at the *Collegio di Santa Croce*, the Congregation's formation house of studies in the eternal city. He remained in this position until 1962 when his work at Vatican II began. **Slide 3**

### **Vatican II, the Press and the Work of Edward Heston, CSC**

The unique nature of Vatican II historically was manifested in ways that directly affected the mass media. As the first Ecumenical Council that could be covered worldwide by the press, radio and even television, the interest of the news media in the conciliar events "reached an unprecedented intensity."<sup>2</sup> The Jesuit historian, Fr. John O'Malley has written "The media took an aggressive interest in the Council. ... The mere spectacle of Vatican II made it newsworthy even apart from anything else that happened."<sup>3</sup> **Slide 4**

The press' interest in the Council was tempered, however, by the historical reality of The Holy See's generally cautious attitude toward journalists and those collectively grouped under the umbrella of the "Fourth Estate." In 1832, Pope Gregory XVI in *Mirari Vos* voiced a common theme:

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Heston, *Vita* n.d. CSCG 267.5 Edward Heston *Vita*, PNDP PR 63/08 Press Release November 25, 1963, Archives University of Notre Dame (hereafter AUND), Notre Dame, Indiana. His siblings were Joseph, Robert, Ruth and Norma.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Komonchak, ed. *History of Vatican II*. Volume II (Formation of the Council's Identity) (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 222.

<sup>3</sup> John O'Malley, S.J. *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2008), 33.

We are horrified to see what monstrous doctrines and prodigious errors are disseminated far and wide in countless books, pamphlets, and other writings which, though small in weight, are very great in malice. We are in tears at the abuse which proceeds from them over the face of the earth.<sup>4</sup>

Despite this less than optimum historical situation, during the vigil period before the Council opened, notes of optimism toward a more open perspective of the Vatican toward the press were voiced. On October 30, 1960 the Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Domenico Tardini, called a press conference assuring correspondents that news of the Council's preparations and sessions would be available to them. One month later on December 3, **Slide 5** Archbishop Pericle Felici, the Secretary-General of the Council, told a group of Italian reporters that there would be a press office at the Council. On October 25, 1961 Pope John received the press corps in a special audience, informing them that the Council press office was taking shape. He encouraged the correspondents, telling them that they can make a great contribution to the Council by publicizing it.

Despite the optimistic tone, more pessimistic voices were also heard. In February 1962 *America* cautioned the press by highlighting its role to support the Church:

A liberalized press policy at the Vatican Council is not a right extended to the Catholic press, but an opportunity for it to serve the Church. To the secular press as well it is an opportunity to demonstrate the high ideals professed by the "Fourth Estate" including the duty to serve the truth for itself.<sup>5</sup>

Possibly the most serious blow to the earlier optimism was voiced by Pope John when, in a speech to the press on the second day of the Council, stated:

Prejudices [of the press] rest most often on inaccurate or incomplete information. People attribute to the Church doctrines which she does not profess. People blame her for attitudes which she has taken in definite historical circumstances, and they

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<sup>4</sup> Pope Gregory XVI, *Mirari Vos*, August 15, 1832, Section 15 in Claudia Carlen, IHM, *The Papal Encyclicals 1740-1878* (Wilmington, North Carolina: McGrath Publishing House, 1981).

<sup>5</sup> "Catholic Press at the Council," *America* 106 (February 24, 1962): 676.

unjustifiably generalize these attributes without taking into account their accidental and particular character.<sup>6</sup>

The set-up and structure of the Vatican Press office, outlined by Pope John, was given concrete structure by Archbishop Felici. In December 1960 Felici announced that the press office, to be located at via dei Serristori 12 near St. Peter's, was to comprise press officers from seven of the world's major languages—German, English, French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, and Polish—with a central director. On May 12, 1962 Pope John named the seven officers, **Slide 6** including for the English-language Msgr. James Tucek, Director of the NCWC News Service in Rome. Msgr. Fausto Vallainc was named as Director.<sup>7</sup> The press officers were not Council Fathers and thus had no access to the daily meetings of the bishops “even though their role was to inform the entire world about the meetings.”<sup>8</sup> The only source of information was an Italian language bulletin, prepared by the Council Secretariat, and translated into the basic seven languages of the panel members.

Despite the great hopes, from the perspective of the press, however, most contemporary reporters gave Session I close to a failing grade. Robert Kaiser, a correspondent for *Time*, did not hold back in his critique:

The anomaly of this Council's first session was that the delegate-observers officially attending the Council and the communities to whom they reported, knew what the Council issues were and the tentative answers offered. But the Catholic peoples of the world—their parish priests included—could only guess.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Edward Heston *The Press and Vatican II* (Notre Dame, IN: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1967), 131-32.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 25; Marjorie Weeke, “Vatican Council Press Relations,” *The Catholic School Editor* xxxv (3) (March 1966): 7. The other six press officers were: French—Fr. Francois Bernard, S.A., German—Msgr, Gerhard Fittkau, Italian—Fr. Francesco Farusi, S.J. Polish—Fr. Stefan Wesoly. Portuguese—Fr. Paolo Almeida, S.J., Spanish—Fr. Cipriano Calderon.

<sup>8</sup> Hilari Ragner, “An Initial Profile of the Assembly,” in Giuseppe Albeigo and Joseph Komonchak, eds. *History of Vatican II*. Volume II (Formation of the Council's Identity) (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 224.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Blair Kaiser, *Pope, Council and World: The Story of Vatican II* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1963), 209.

Contemporaries of Kaiser were equally harsh in their assessment. For example, Father Raymond Bosler, editor of the Indianapolis *Criterion*, suggested, “The English-speaking ... world was at a decided disadvantage during the first session of Vatican Council II.”

Historians concur on this negative image of the press coverage during Session I. Two of the most prominent historians of Vatican II, Joseph Fameree and John O’Malley, S. J., have expounded on the failures of the press coverage in Session I. Fameree speaks of “the deplorable state of conciliar information during the first session.”<sup>10</sup> O’Malley characterized the Vatican press office as “in crisis,” stating, “The official bulletins issued managed to be at the same time uninformative and blatantly favorable to the conservatives.”<sup>11</sup>

Edward Heston was equally disappointed in the opportunities afforded the press. He commented, “It is very true that during the first session the press coverage was not at all what people would have liked or we can even say what it should have been.” A few years after the Council he wrote, “The general feeling was that unless there were some radical changes in the following session, the Council could not fail to lose prestige before world opinion.”<sup>12</sup>

The generally negative reaction to the press coverage of the first session led to a period of transition that eventually saw a more open policy developed and practiced.<sup>13</sup> The desired and

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<sup>10</sup> Joseph Fameree, “Bishops and Diocese and the Communications Media (November 5-25, 1963) in Alberigo and Komonchak, eds. *History of Vatican II* Volume III (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2000), 176..

<sup>11</sup> O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, 152.

<sup>12</sup> Heston, *The Press and Vatican II*, 50, 54.

<sup>13</sup> The controversy associated with press coverage notwithstanding, the Council Fathers at the first session initiated debate in November on a schema that addressed the Church’s relationship to the media. The debate was “perfunctory, generally favorable, and lasted only three days,”<sup>13</sup> but in essence the Council Fathers legitimized the efforts of many who had for years been hoping to see social communication recognized as a special sphere for pastoral work. In Session II, *Inter mirifica*, the “Decree on the Means of Social Communication,” was overwhelmingly approved by the bishops and issued along with *Sacrosantum Concilium*, “The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy,” on December 4, 1963, becoming the first two documents promulgated at Vatican II.

necessary changes in the press coverage of the Council began in earnest in the spring of 1963. On May 19 a meeting was held, at which Heston represented the National Catholic Welfare Conference (NCWC), to determine a new approach. He reported, "Everyone was merely feeling his way around ... the impression was also that ... eventually something worthwhile would be set up."<sup>14</sup>

The death of Pope John XXIII on June 3, 1963 placed a hold on the Council's plans, but the new pontiff, Paul VI, enthusiastically endorsed promotion of the press and manifested an openness and transparency missing in session I. This led to a revamped Vatican Press Office and Episcopal Committee, chaired by Archbishop Martin O'Connor, then serving as rector of the North American College. The centerpiece of the new policy was the assignment of seven (later expanded to nine) press officers for various languages.<sup>15</sup> These men would attend the daily sessions of the Council Fathers, have access to all schemata and other Council documents and when available speeches made from the floor. Secrecy was restricted to actual texts of documents under debate and the discussions held in various commissions. Each officer was given autonomy to write his own daily summaries.

The necessity to provide an English language press officer led those responsible to the door of Father Heston. At the end of session I, James Tucek resigned as the English language representative of the Vatican Press Office, prompting the need for a replacement. After consulting with the Superior General of the Congregation of Holy Cross, Father Germain Lalande, CSC, Heston was assigned as the English-speaking press officer. **Slide 7**

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<sup>14</sup> Edward Heston, CSC to Philip Hannan, May 24, 1963, CSCG 267.6, Vatican II 1963 Press Representative Folder; Minutes of Conference of Directors of the National and Religious Information and Documentation Centers for Vatican II, May 19, 1963, CSCG 267.5, Edward Heston *Vita*, AUND.

<sup>15</sup> The languages were: English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, German, Polish, Chinese and Arabic.

The second session of Vatican II opened on September 29, 1963, with the new press policy in place. Heston and the six other language press officers (eventually there were a total of nine) attended the Council sessions each day, attending daily Mass and then observing the session which began at 9:30 a.m. All took notes in order to give an oral briefing and provide a written bulletin for their respective correspondents. Heston's remarkable memory and absolute command of Latin allowed him to understand the speeches from the floor better than the vast majority of bishops themselves, despite variations in accent. Although for purposes of generating an Italian summary each press officer was at least in theory responsible for only three or four speakers per day,<sup>16</sup> it became clear to Heston almost immediately that he would generate his own brief of the day's events. Writing only three weeks after the start of Session II, he commented, "I have to listen in on all of the speeches as a matter of fact, because I have begun to follow the policy of writing my own bulletins and not following slavishly the contents of the Italian bulletin."<sup>17</sup>

The end of the daily session at approximately 12:30 p.m. inaugurated a rush of activity for Heston. Scurrying across the piazza of St. Peter he arrived at the Vatican Press Office at Via della Conciliazione 52-54. After organizing his notes and making mental preparations for roughly 20 minutes, he gave an approximate 30 minute oral briefing to the assembled press. One journalist commented,

Father Heston punctually began his oral briefing at 12:30 with a simple introduction of, "Your attention, please!" Then with the help of the few notes he launched into a generally uninterrupted 30 minute rapid-fire briefing on the morning's developments.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> PNDP PR 63/08 Press release, November 24, 1963, AUND.

<sup>17</sup> Edward Heston, CSC to Arthur Haley, September 30, 1963, CSCG 267.6, Vatican II 1963 Press Representative Folder, AUND.

<sup>18</sup> Elmer von Feldt, "The Press and the Second Session of Vatican II," *Catholic Press Annual* 5 (1964), 6.

In typical simplicity, Heston described his daily activity: "I give the correspondents a good 'rundown' of what happened in the morning. ... My job is simply getting the news of the Council to the English-speaking press of the world."<sup>19</sup>

Immediately after completing his briefing, Heston ascended to the second floor press office to generate the daily press bulletins which served as the base for stories filed by reporters throughout the English-speaking world. He worked with secretaries, initially those provided by the NCWC, to generate his own bulletin, believing that an English translation of the composite of the initial Italian summary was totally inadequate.<sup>20</sup> When completed the bulletins were mimeographed and distributed at 3 p.m. to the eagerly awaiting reporters, the English-speaking bishops and Vatican Radio so it could prepare for its 4 p.m. English broadcast.<sup>21</sup>

The positive reaction to the new press policy was a complete reversal from the disappointment of session I. A group of American reporters, including Robert Kaiser of *Time*, Michael Novak of *The New Republic*, James O'Gara of *Commonweal*, and Donald Campion, S.J. of *America*, wrote to Felici, in gratitude for the new approach:

We, the reporters and correspondents representing the English-language press at the Second Vatican Council, wish to express our delight over the news arrangement during the second session.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Audio Tape, AECB 45145-46, AUND.

<sup>20</sup> Heston, *The Press and Vatican II*, 6.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>22</sup> Letter from Various Reporters to Pericle Felici, October 7, 1963, Vatican II Papers, Box 653, Folder 6, *Segreto Archivio Vaticano* (Hereafter SAV), Vatican City, Italy.



Heston too was very pleased with the better coverage during the second session, emphasizing its advancement of the Church: “This new policy is hoping to present the authentic image of the Council and of the Church itself to the press of the world and consequently before the public.”<sup>23</sup>

Heston’s rapport with and respect for the press was indeed high. While he believed the role of reporters was to circulate the news, with the Church tasked with the responsibility to interpret it,<sup>24</sup> he nonetheless held the press in the greatest esteem. He stated, “Journalists have made the finest impression on me. They have a wonderful spirit and sense of cooperation, and I have the highest regard for them.”<sup>25</sup> He praised reporters for their sincere “desire to get the whole news and present it properly.”<sup>26</sup> He considered it “a pleasure to be working with the gentlemen of the press.”<sup>27</sup>

Heston’s respect for the press was returned in spades by reporters. An *America* editorial called Heston “a key man” in the implementation of the improved press policy from the second period forward.<sup>28</sup> One reporter referred to him as “one of the marvels of Vatican II, without whom they [reporters] would have found it difficult if not impossible to interpret the Council to their readers.”<sup>29</sup> Heston understood what reporters wanted and what questions they needed answered. The British reporter, Desmond Fisher claimed that Heston’s bulletins were affecting

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<sup>23</sup> Audio Tape AECB 45145-46, AUND. In a similar vein Heston stated, “Last year the reporters were judging the daily news bulletins; this year the news bulletins will judge the reporters.”

<sup>24</sup> Edward Heston, “Vatican II’s Church of the Future,” *Columbia* 46 (February 1966), 14.

<sup>25</sup> “U.S Priest Aids Newsmen, January 8, 1965, NCWC News Service in CSCG 267.5, Edward Heston Vita, AUND.

<sup>26</sup> Audio Tape AECB 45145-46, AUND.

<sup>27</sup> Edward Heston, CSC to Allan Jacks, December 29, 1964, 267.6 1964 and 1968 India Trip Folder, AUND.

<sup>28</sup> “Better Council Coverage,” *America* 109 (November 1, 1963): 473.

<sup>29</sup> Mary C. Price, “Briefing the Press: How the Vatican Council Releases News to the World,” *Jubilee* 13 (May 1965): 16.

the debate in the Council sessions: “The fact that every Bishop knows that what he says is going to be known to the whole world in a couple of hours makes them a bloody sight more careful.”<sup>30</sup>

The third and fourth periods of Vatican II saw a basic continuation of the policies **Slide 8** adopted in session II, but for Heston there were some special moments that went beyond his basic duties. At the conclusion of the third period, Heston was asked by Pope Paul VI to serve as the press officer for his trip to Bombay, India to attend a Eucharistic Congress. His appointment was not seen as a great surprise for he was widely known as a great “bridge between the press and the Holy See,”<sup>31</sup> and, therefore, the perfect candidate for the job. Heston’s work was applauded by Weldon Wallace, a reporter for the *Baltimore Sun*: “Father Heston ... did the masterly job we have come to expect from him.”<sup>32</sup> In October 1965, during the middle of period IV, the Council and Heston were startled by the announcement that the pontiff planned to travel to New York to address the United Nations. This first ever trip to the United States by a reigning pope, prompted ABC news to contact Heston asking that he serve as a commentator on the television coverage of the visit. Honored by the invitation, Heston secured a brief replacement in the Vatican Press Office, journeyed to New York and covered the whirlwind 20 hour visit. As with the earlier Bombay visit, Heston’s work was lauded by Jesse Zousmer, Director of ABC Television News: “I must tell you how pleased we were with your performance during our coverage of the Papal visit. I thought you ‘came across’ as a fine representative of ABC News, the Holy Cross Fathers and the Holy See.”<sup>33</sup> **Slide 9**

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<sup>30</sup> “The Vatican Beat,” *Newsweek*, October 26, 1964, 65, found in CSCG 267.6, Vatican II 1964-67 Folder, AUND.

<sup>31</sup> Marjorie Weeke, Interview with the author, June 16, 2015.

<sup>32</sup> Weldon Wallace to Cardinal Valerian Gracias, December 14, 1964, CSCG 276.6, 1964 India Trip, AUND.

<sup>33</sup> Jesse Zousmer to Edward Heston, CSC, October 6, 1965, CSCG267.6, 1965 New York City Visit Folder, AUND.

Vatican II ended in December 1965, but the participation of Edward Heston with the Roman Curia and the press continued. In September 1971, after serving briefly as the Secretary for the Sacred Congregation for Religious,<sup>34</sup> Heston, was named by Pope Paul as President of the Pontifical Commission on Social Communications, replacing Archbishop Martin O'Connor. On the ensuing February 13 Pope Paul ordained him an Archbishop to the titular see of Numidia.<sup>35</sup> Unfortunately Heston's opportunity to meet the challenge was cut short when he died suddenly on May 2, 1973 while traveling through the Denver airport. Five days later, he was buried from Sacred Heart Church at Notre Dame.<sup>36</sup>

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Contemporary life calls for transparency in every avenue of our daily existence. From the world of politics to the Church, and everything in between, the call goes out for open and honest information exchange in order to avoid any "skeletons in the closet." In 1962, when the Second Vatican Council began, this shroud of secrecy remained relatively unchanged. However, calls from the press, and the rather unbelievable attention and interest in Vatican II, prompted the Church to open its doors to the world. For the English-speaking world, Father Edward Heston, CSC, became the bridge between the Council's daily activity and millions of interested people across the globe. Heston's contribution to the work of the Council, through his daily briefings and bulletins was highly significant. His effort, combined with the work of his fellow press officers became the basic prototype for the establishment in 1972 of the Pontifical Commission for Social Communication with Heston as its second president. While freedom of the press has

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<sup>34</sup> Heston served as Secretary for the Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes from 1969 to 1971.

<sup>35</sup> Edward Heston, *Vita*, CSCG 267.5, Edward Heston *Vita*, AUND.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

always been enshrined by citizens of the United States as a constitutional right, it was through the work of the press and in large measure Edward Heston that similar acceptance was found in the Church. For this effort the press and the contemporary Church should be eternally grateful.